DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 540 FL 022 172

AUTHOR Berman, Robert
TITLE EFL Essay Writing: L1 Versus L2 Instruction.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (28th, Baltimore, MD, March 8-12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Essays; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; High Schools; High School Students; *Language Proficiency; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; *Transfer of Training; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Iceland

ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of English grammatical proficiency on the ability of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to transfer essay organization skills, newly learned in their first language (L1), to the second language (L2). The subjects were 104 inexpert EFL upper secondary school students from three schools in Iceland. The subjects were divided into three groups: (1) those receiving L1 essay writing instruction; (2) those receiving equivalent L2 instruction; and (3) those receiving no such instruction. Pre- and post-tests administered at the beginning and end of the 12-week research period graded essay organization and grammatical proficiency. The results indicated that the learners who did transfer writing skills from L1 to L2 were assisted by their grammatical proficiency in the target language. (MDM)

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Robert Berman
Lancaster University, UK
E-mail in Iceland: rberman@rhi.hi.is

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EFL essay writing: L1 versus L2 instruction

Paper presented at TESOL 94 - Baltimore

ED 373 540

Abstract

Looking at test scores of 104 inexpert EFL writers, this experimental study examines the effect of English grammatical proficiency on learners' transfer of essay organization skills, newly learned in their L1, to their L2. Students were divided into three groups: those receiving L1 essay writing instruction; those receiving equivalent L2 instruction; and those receiving no such instruction. Pre- and post-tests, administered at the beginning and end of the 12-week research period, were scored for essay organization and grammatical proficiency. The paper concludes that the learners who did transfer writing skills from L1 to L2 were assisted by their grammatical proficiency in the target language.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses one element of a larger research project undertaken among secondary school students in Iceland. The larger study examined learners' ability to transfer essay writing skills--newly-learned either Icelandic (their L1) or English (L2)--to the other language. This paper, looking at the writing scores of the less able L2 writers (n=104), focuses on the effect of these learners' L2 grammatical proficiency on their ability to transfer newly acquired writing skills from their L1.

Advanced EFL and ESL curricula often include the teaching of essay writing. However, research has not clarified whether instruction in such a demanding task might be more effectively carried out in students' first language, with the expectation that the learners would transfer writing skills to the L2.

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Cummins (1991) reviews a number of studies which support his view that school-age learners who develop what he refers to as "decontextualized language skills" through their first language tend to develop similar skills in their second language. A study by Cumming (1990) of 23 Francophone Canadian adults strongly supports Cummins' view, and moreover makes the point that grammatical proficiency was *not* a factor in his participants' ability to transfer writing skills between languages: "People simply enacted composing strategies, characteristic of their mother tongue expertise, in their second language".

It is conceivable that whatever thoughts a writer generates before writing can be expressed in a variety of ways not tied to a particular language. It would follow that, to the

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extent that thoughts are transferable across languages, people should be able to apply the skills and knowledge that they have acquired in first-language writing, to their L2 writing. In an L1 context, Scardamalia (1981) offers the appealing suggestion that children should be able to convey complex thoughts through simple vocabulary and elementary sentences just as well as through difficult words and complex sentences. An implication of this notion for the issue of transfer is that writers would not need to be as proficient in their L2 as in their first language in order to employ their L1 thinking skills in their L2 writing.

On the other hand, research in L2 reading by Clarke (1980) and Carrell (1991) presents strong evidence suggesting that some sort of threshold or language competence ceiling has to be attained in the L2 before existing abilities in the first language can begin to transfer. In the field of writing, preliminary studies by Yau (1987) indicate that transferability of writing skills requires a similar threshold of second language grammatical competence as that reported in the reading research.

A disagreement exists, then, between those who suggest that students' L2 grammatical proficiency plays a part in their ability to transfer reading or writing skills between languages, and those who do not acknowledge L2 grammatical proficiency as a major factor.

The research question addressed here is this: Does the level of English grammatical proficiency affect intermediate-level EFL students' ability to transfer writing skills, newly gained in L1, to their L2 writing?

LOCATION

Iceland was an ideal location to base the study, for although Icelandic is very much the nation's first language, English is the language of the movies, much television programming and a great deal of the popular music, meaning that Icelanders are highly exposed to English and most are motivated to learn the language. However, Icelanders' grammatical proficiency in English varies greatly, as one would expect in a place where people are not in any formal sense (except in school) required to know this foreign language.

The homogeneity of Icelandic EFL learners--the relative lack of diversity of their education, socio-economic status and language background--was also an advantage in locating the study in Iceland. This lack of diversity (unlike the situation among ESL learners in North America, for example) meant that students' writing ability and English grammatical proficiency would not be confounded with a myriad of other variables such as length of residency in the country, language of the community, and so forth.

Finally, basing the study in Iceland meant that contrastive rhetoric need not be an issue. Many L2 writing studies examining learners' written product have purported to show distinct and sometimes culturally inappropriate rhetorical patterns surfacing in learners' English

writing as a result of students' "negative transfer" of discourse conventions from their L1. While it would be folly to claim that *all* written discourse conventions within *all* written genres are similar in Icelandic and English, it does seem true that secondary school essay writing instruction is similar in the Icelandic and EFL secondary school curricula in Iceland, and that no apparent differences exist between the essay models that are presented in the two language classrooms.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

126, 17- and 18-year old intermediate EFL students at 3 upper secondary schools (*gymnasia* in the German system) in Iceland took part in the study . One class at each of the three schools was randomly assigned to receive Icelandic instruction in persuasive essay writing; together, these 40 students comprised Group L1. A second class at each school was assigned to receive similar instruction in English (Group L2; n = 46). Finally, a third class at each school received no essay writing instruction (the Comparison Group; n = 40).

All students had received some essay writing instruction in Icelandic in the first year of their secondary school studies. The additional, highly focussed, essay writing instruction received by students in Groups L1 and L2 during this study was not a normal component of the second year curriculum. Thus, no ethical question arose with some students receiving essay writing instruction and others receiving none.

Table 1

GROUPS	**N**	**ICELANDIC (L1) SYLLABUS**	**ENGLISH (L2) SYLLABUS**
GROUP L1	40	***Essay writing*** Grammar Literature	Letters & journals Grammar Literature
GROUP L2	46	Stylistics Grammar Literature	***Essay writing*** Grammar Literature
COMPARISON	40	Stylistics Grammar Literature	Letters & journals Grammar Literature

All groups were similar in terms of mean age (about 17.5) and male-female ratio (about 1:2). At each school, one English teacher taught all three EFL classes. One teacher taught all L1 classes at School II, but two L1 teachers were involved at each of the other schools: one teaching essay instruction and the other teaching the regular Icelandic language curriculum.

All 126 students followed the same basic Icelandic and English language curricula, though students in Groups L1 and L2 received essay-writing instruction in lieu of other writing practice such as letter and journal writing (or, in Icelandic, in some cases instead of stylistics). Regular English instruction included grammar and literature classes and opportunities to practice speaking and listening. The regular Icelandic instruction also included classes in L1 grammar and literature.

Essay writing lessons

The study has been a collaborative project undertaken with a number of teachers in Iceland. The goal has been to work cooperatively so that local educators will be inclined to incorporate the study's findings into their teaching. To that end, the experimental intervention employed in the study is intentionally based on the teaching approach currently employed in Icelandic schools. Teachers were recruited who were interested in teaching writing, and their ideas and approaches were incorporated into the study's design. I neither apologise for nor advocate the prescriptive product-oriented teaching approach that was employed in this study. However, the actual 14-class/10-lesson *course* is *not* recommended, for it was far too perfunctory, and was seen as such by the teachers involved. (Unfortunately, only 14 lessons could be spared for this study from the students' busy timetable; see Table 2, below)

It may be noted in Table 2 that of the 14 "essay-writing" classes:

- Four were taken up administering the pre- and post-tests.
- Six were devoted to instruction (lectures, group and individual seat-work).
- Four were devoted to actual in-class writing.

Each student wrote three draft persuasive essays. Each of these was handed in, commented upon by the teacher and returned to the student, who rewrote it. It was then handed back to the teacher, who commented upon it again and handed it back. To confirm that the teaching conformed to the research design, all classes were observed and audio-taped once, teaching materials were examined, and 27 students and all teachers were interviewed. Analyses of these data continue, but preliminary indications are that instruction did generally conform to the plan.

Table 2

The L1 and L2 essay-writing lessons

Class 1	ICELANDIC PRE-TEST (L1 Essay topic A or B, randomly assigned)
Class 2	ENGLISH PRE-TEST (L2 Essay topic A or B, randomly assigned)
Class 3	What is a paragraph? What is an essay? Group and individual exercises.
Class 4	Audience. Exercise: Improving writing in which the reader has not been kept in mind.
Class 5	Transition devices/connectives. Group & Individual Exercises. *Draft Essay # 1 handed in*
Class 6	*Draft Essay #1 returned to students with feedback* Students use the class to rewrite (or to begin to rewrite) the essay.
Class 7	Outlining an essay Model essays are analysed/discussed. *Essay # 2 assigned: written in the next class.*
Class 8	*Draft Essay #2 written in class.*
Class 9	*Draft Essay #2 returned to students* . Students rewrite it.
Class 10	Improving an essay's introduction & conclusion.
Class 11	Analyses/Discussion/Sharing of student essays. *Draft Essay #3 handed in*
Class 12	*Draft Essay #3 returned to students* . Students rewrite it.
Class 13	ICELANDIC POST-TEST (Icelandic topic, A or B, that was not written as pre-test)
Class 14	ENGLISH POST-TEST (The English topic not written as pre-test)

Pre- and Post-tests

Both the English and Icelandic pre- and post-tests were timed (40-minute) essays and were counterbalanced, with about half of the randomly selected students writing Test A (i.e. Essay Topic A) as pre-test, followed by Test B as post-test. The other half of the students wrote B as pre-test and A as post-test.

Rating pre- and post-tests

It should be emphasized that the scoring guide (Table 3) relates to what was taught in the essay writing classes and not necessarily to up-to-date process-oriented writing methodology (See the discussion above about involving local teachers).

Two experienced EFL teachers and two experienced L1 teachers were trained to score the essays. These independent experts scored the pre- and post-test essays *blind*, using a scoring guide that had been piloted in Iceland in advance of this study to reflect the particular characteristics of the persuasive essay as it is written by this population.

Various features of the genre were scored between 0 and 4, a 5-point scale that had the advantage of matching the E-to-A grades with which raters were familiar (Table 3, below, shows four features relevant to this paper.) A score for Organization was calculated by

adding the scores for Thesis, Argument and Conclusion. A separate 0-to-4 holistic score for "Grammar" was also awarded to each essay.

Table 3

FOUR FEATURES OF THE SCORING GUIDE

Thesis
A thesis statement, i.e. an opinion, was located somewhere in the first two paragraphs. For a top score of 4 the thesis statement had to match the assigned essay topic, as well as the content of the essay. A score 0 was awarded if no thesis statement was apparent.

Argument
The score is dependent upon the number of non-contradictory, unambiguous points that support, or logically stem from, the thesis statement. A point could be:
- an item of information or a fact presented to defend the thesis.
- a reference, i.e. a source of information.
- a logical statement presented as an argument.
- "background information", if relevant.

Irrelevant information caused deductions in the score.

Conclusion
The writer either reiterated the essay's thesis or summarized its main points. A score of 4 was awarded if one of these requirements was fulfilled. A score of 0 was awarded if no conclusion was attempted.

ORGANIZATION SCORE = Thesis + Argument + Conclusion

"Grammar"
A separate 0-to-4 holistic score for "grammar" paid attention largely to syntax and vocabulary. Incorrect spelling was not penalized as long as words were spelled phonetically correctly. Essays receiving a low score tended to exhibit:
- non-standard word order (and *was it* very fine thing to do, but *not plainly* perfect);
- omissions (they think__no need of having__higher price);
- redundancies (these kids are not all *of them* punks);
- verb errors, including lack of agreement with subject (we *wants*), and incorrect form (can *made*);
- other errors in syntax;
- incorrect lexical choice (Europeans drink *all days*).

RESULTS

Inter-rater reliability: Icelandic and English essay scores

Inter-rater reliability was assessed for both the Icelandic and English essays. Pearson correlations of the raters' scores were satisfactory, all being over 0.7 for the component scores of Organization.

The effects of writing ability and grammatical proficiency

I will examine only the performance of the students who had the most to gain from instruction, the 104 students whose English pre-test Organization scores were below 8 out of 12. The effects of grammatical proficiency can first be analysed by splitting these 104 less able essay writers into two groups:

1) The 53 who obtained a grammar score of less than or equal to 2.25 out of four. These were therefore the writers who were both unable to emulate the genre very well, *and* less grammatically proficient. I will call them the LGP sub-group.
2) The 51 whose grammar scores were greater than 2.25. These were the writers who were less able to emulate the genre, but more grammatically proficient (the MGP sub-group).

The LGP sub-group made a mean gain of 1.48 points in their Organization score between pre- and post-test, whereas the MGP sub-group gained a mean of 2.32 (Table 4). The difference between the mean gains of the two grammatical proficiency groups is especially interesting in view of the fact that those with low grammar scores also tended to receive low pre-test Organization scores, meaning that although the LGP sub-group were among those who stood to gain the most in terms of improved organization over the research period, it seems that some students were held back by their poor grammatical proficiency.

Table 4

Organization score gains of less able writers
Separated by level of Grammar score

(Gain=Post-test minus pre-test score) n=104

*Grammar Score	Pre-test	Gain	σ
LGP (≤2.25) n=53	4.27	**1.48**	2.41
MGP (>2.25) n=53	4.56	**2.32**	2.97

* Grammar score = Average of pre- & post-test Grammar scores

The combined effects of grammatical proficiency *plus* language of instruction creates a complex pattern (Table 5). On the one hand, it appears that grammatical proficiency was not a crucial factor among the students taught in English. The mean gain in the Organization score made by the 18 LGP writers who were taught in English was 2.15, a gain not very much less than the 2.37 gained by the 18 MGP writers.

On the other hand, among the less able L2 writers taught in Icelandic, it appears that their English grammatical proficiency influenced the post-test gain of their English Organization scores. In Group L1, the mean gain made by the 15 LGP writers was 1.92, which is substantially less than the gain of 3.06 made by the 16 MGP writers.

Table 5

Organization score (Org.) gains of less able writers (n=104)
Separated by Language of Instruction
(Gain=Post-test score minus pre-test score)

Language of Instruction	Org. Pre-test	**Org. Gain**	σ	**Grammar**	Org. Pre-test	**Org. Gain**	σ
L1 n=31	3.95	**2.51**	2.36	**LGP** n=15	3.49	**1.92**	1.79
				MGP n=16	4.39	**3.06**	2.73
L2 n=36	4.61	**2.26**	2.96	**LGP** n=18	4.34	**2.15**	2.95
				MGP n=18	4.88	**2.37**	3.05
Comp. n=37	4.61	**1.01**	2.60	**LGP** n=20	4.80	**0.54**	2.05
				MGP n=17	4.38	**1.56**	3.09

LGP=Less grammatically proficient writers
MGP=More grammatically proficient writers

Multiple regression analyses (employed because of the large number of variables involved; see Table 6) show that significant effects were exerted both by English language instruction ($p<.03$) and students' Grammatical proficiency ($p<.01$).

Table 6

Multiple Regression Analysis: Organization scores of the "Less Able" writers (n=104)

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	T	Sig T
Grammar	.65	.24	.26	2.73	.0076
L1 Instruction	.97	.57	.18	1.70	.0925
Pre-test	.27	.13	.19	2.01	.0473
L2 Instruction	1.23	.54	.24	2.26	.0257
(Constant)	2.97	.82		3.65	.0004

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Learners' ability to transfer writing skills between languages seems to relate to their grammatical proficiency in the target language. Perhaps learners with poor proficiency need to devote far more of their memory capacity to finding the right words and constructions, leaving less capacity to deal with such skills as organization.

As a curricular approach meant to improve EFL essay writing, L1 instruction should probably be restricted to those learners who possess a high level of English grammatical proficiency. Furthermore, EFL writing teachers should not neglect the teaching of syntax and vocabulary, for only after these skills have become automated will students be able to concentrate sufficiently upon skills such as organization.

In discussing the pedagogical implications of her L2 reading study, Carrell (1991) states, "Some readers, especially foreign language readers, especially those at lower proficiency levels, may need relatively greater help with second language skills in order to transfer their good reader skills from their native language" (p. 169). The present study suggests giving similar advice to teachers of L2 *writing*. EFL and ESL teachers should be aware of the potential usefulness of the L1 in teaching writing, but should realize that the extended use of students' native language may not be especially beneficial for those whose English grammatical proficiency is low.

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